



## Letters to the Editor

### Dentists' firepower

I found the April issue of your Newsletter most interesting since I know much less than I should about dentistry's history in the British Isles. The article by Linda Chapman on Leon Jablonski Platt is a gem, reflecting a prodigious amount of research. I had never heard of Platt and I found the story fascinating.

I was also most appreciative to read the fine obituary of Dr R.A.Cohen. Ronnie and I were good friends, and during my several visits to Europe my wife and I visited with him and Muriel. He was always able to fill me in when I lacked some bit of information relative to British dentistry. A paper I wrote on the origin of the word "stent" was published last year in our *Journal of the History of Dentistry*, and Ronnie helped me with some personal information about the English dentist Charles Stent, who developed the impression compound which was later used by plastic surgeons for support in their molding of tissues. Surgeons began saying they were "Stenting" something, but later the capital "S" was dropped. Thus we have the word "stent."

I was also very interested in the letter from Bill Smith regarding dentists and the development of firearms. I would like to offer a slight correction, however. The first machine gun was not that of the medical doctor Gatling, but rather one made and patented by a Rochester, New York dentist, Dr Josephus Requa. He and a gunsmith built a prototype of this gun in 1861, and received patent 36,448 on September 16, 1862. The gun consisted of 25 barrels mounted horizontally on a two-wheel wagon and weighed 500lb. A clip held twenty-five .52 caliber bullets, which were loaded at one time and fired with a single long percussion cap. Three soldiers could reload seven times a minute, thus getting off 175 shots in one minute.

Although the Chief of Ordnance Procurement was not interested, claiming his men could shoot "fast enough," Dr Requa sought an audience with President Lincoln, who was very impressed with the gun and, on his own initiative, ordered tests to be made.

The new gun was pressed into service on the very next day at the bloody battle of Antietam. Unfortunately, although the guns were delivered to the battlefield in time, the ships carrying the bullets had been sunk by the Confederates as it made its way to the battle. However, the guns did see action at the battle of Charleston in 1863 and at St Petersburg and Cold Harbor in 1864. Proper recognition never did come to Dr Requa for his contribution. His gun, the first machine gun, was soon supplanted by the more successful hand-cranked Gatling gun which could fire 350 rounds a minute.

Another dentist who was involved in ordnance was Dr Edward Maynard, who practised in Washington, DC. In 1859 he patented the first practical carbine using a percussion cap which fired brass-bound cartridges. This was so superior to the old ram-rod rifles with their gunpowder and lead balls that many thousands were bought by the Union armies and were dubbed "the Gun that Won the War."

I look forward to reading the next issue of your excellent publication!

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